

THE COUSINS.

by ELLEN ASHTON.

“What do you think of Charlotte Estaigne!” said Fletcher Cowell to his friend Henry Desmond, and removing his cigar from his mouth, he suffered the smoke to curl up in a white silvery line, along his face.

“She is dazzlingly beautiful—a perfect Juno!” enthusiastically responded Desmond.

“Do you admire her more than you admire her cousin, Helen Stevens!” said Fletcher, and he replaced his cigar, and pushed the flask.

“To be sure. Helen is pretty, sweet, amiable and all that; but she has nothing of that magnificent beauty which characterizes Miss Estaigne. The one might pass for a queen, the other would only do for her humble companion. One’s fancy pictures the one on a throne, while the other sits at her feet, looking up into her face.”

“But, after all, the humble companion, though not so showy, may have more real merit than your dazzling queen.”

“Never. Give me a dashing, brilliant creature—a little aristocratic, haughty if you will—and I would not exchange her for all the amiable young ladies you can rake together from now till Christmas. No—no, Charlotte Estaigne is as far above her cousin, as the star is above the fire-fly. What a superb walk she has! And then her air,—why, my dear fellow, Helen Stevens, should she live till doomsday, will never excite a buzz like that which follows her cousin every time she enters a room. I wonder how you can compare the two L”

“I do not compare them: their characters are too opposite. But that Helen would make, for either you or me, the better wife, I have no more doubt than that I am now knocking the ashes from this cigar. Granting all you have said in Charlotte’s favor, she has one fault that will always make her and those around her unhappy —she has a bad temper.”

“Pshaw! she has been giving you a bitter retort, and you have not yet forgiven her. A bad temper!—if wit makes a woman ill-tempered, or if a proper spirit is to

be called anger, then indeed is Miss Estaigne passionate. Believe me she has a temper far better than her cousin, who indeed seems never to think for herself, but to submit to imposition with an inertness that often makes me question her intellect."

"So much for a superficial study of these fair cousins. Catharine, I grant, is showy, but she is also shallow; her wit is the ripple on the surface and not the deep tide below. But Helen is the very opposite. Her modesty, at first, conceals from you her real merit, but once gain the footing of a friend with her, and you will soon be convinced of the superiority of her intellect. True, she always yields to her cousin, but that is because Charlotte is selfish and high tempered, which Helen knot. Nor can Miss Estaigne ever love as her cousin could love. The one is too much occupied with herself to bestow a very large share of her heart on a lover; but the affection of the other, when once she yields to the passion, will endure till death, I would marry Helen tomorrow if I thought I could win her."

"And more fool for it! Give me her queenly cousin. As for your prognostics of her ill-temper I mind them not; and even should your prophecies turn out true, I could soon correct this evil in my wife."

"I fear you would find it more difficult than you suppose. Of all habits that of indulging in bursts of passion, is the most difficult to overcome; and it can only be broken by a long and rigid course of self-denial. Charlotte is not capable of such a struggle, and though love is a powerful ally, it cannot always win the victory. Besides love to Miss Estaigne would always be a secondary matter."

"You are incorrigible," said Desmond, drowning his chagrin in a glass of champagne, "and I am half minded to challenge you for abusing Miss Estaigne; but I believe I shall pass it by, only retaliating by saying —what I really think— that Helen Steevens is as pliable as willow, and as simple as a child. But come, if we talk this way of the cousins, we shall get at dagger's points. Let us have charity for each other's opinions, for I begin to suspect we are both in love. Suppose we adjourn our discussion, and each drink his charmer's health."

"With all my heart," said Fletcher, "and I will add to the toast, 'may you never be deceived in Charlotte.'"

"Hush!" said Desmond, lifting his finger, "not another word. Let us stick to our compact, and each, as the Scotch say, dree his own doom."

Fletcher had, however, formed the more accurate estimate of the characters of

the two cousins; and indeed his love for Helen was based on his superior appreciation of her merit. Like most others, he had at first been dazzled by the wit and beauty of Charlotte, but a more intimate acquaintance had dissolved the charm, by convincing him that her sparkling satire was in reality the offspring of an ill-tempered heart. Of the wit of the imagination she had but little.

She was selfish, exacting, vain, jealous, and superficial. Fletcher soon turned from her in disgust, the more readily because the sweetness and intelligence of Helen had won on him more and more at each succeeding interview. He found that Miss Steevens, though less showy, was more solid than her cousin, that her beauty, though not so dazzling, better endured scrutiny, and that her affability of temper was the result, not of an imbecile, but of a well regulated mind. Where Miss Estaigne was only accomplished, Helen was well informed. Where the one was generous from impulse the other was benevolent from duty. While the elder cousin sought on all occasions only her own gratification, the younger one labored as much for the pleasure of others as for that of herself. The love of Fletcher, therefore, for this sweet girl was the offspring of a firm conviction of her worth. It was a passion which, he felt, could end only with his life.

The love of Desmond for Charlotte was a different thing, a mere romantic fancy, nursed by the imagination, and which would have been at variance with the judgment if that faculty had not been lulled to sleep. Struck by the fascinations of Miss Estaigne he had shut his eyes to her imperfections. Like too many lovers, of both sexes, he had created an ideal being, no more like the reality than a landscape mellowed by twilight is like the same scene beneath the noonday sun. He heard the strictures of Fletcher, therefore, with real astonishment, and magnified into virtues—as we have seen—what his friend called errors. His opinion of Helen was formed without any intimate acquaintance with her. It was an error such as is often committed by superficial thinkers.

Time passed. The attentions of Desmond to Miss Estaigne soon became decided, and at length their marriage was spoken of as an occurrence which would speedily take place. Nor was the public voice more reserved in assigning Helen Steevens to Mr. Go well. For once, too, the rumors were correct. The two young men were married within the same month.

A bare six months had elapsed since his marriage ere Desmond's whole character appeared to be changed. His brow wore an anxious and care-worn expression, which the extravagant mirth that he affected at times failed to

remove. It was evident that all was not right within, that happiness was a stranger to him, and that he strove but vainly to conceal his feelings. It speedily came to be rumored that he rarely spent an evening at home, but was ever to be found with gay and dissolute companions. As month after month rolled by, his disinclination to the domestic hearth became more and more apparent, until finally his desertion of his wife became the theme of general remark. As usual some blamed the lady and some the gentleman. A few spoke of peevishness, self-love, and constant recriminations, which were said to have made Desmond an exile from his home; but the greater number denounced him as the most brutal of men for his desertion of an unoffending wife.

It was about a year after his unhappy marriage that Desmond dropped in one evening to see his friend Fletcher. The tidy room, the air of comfort around, and the happy smiles of the wife caused an involuntary sigh from the haggard and now morose Desmond. His visit was of short duration. After he retired a mutual silence prevailed with the young and happy couple. At length the wife spoke,

“Poor Desmond!” she said, “how bad he looks! Charlotte, I fear, has never acted toward him as she should: indeed I often see things there which make my heart ache. Alas! for my deluded cousin.”

“Do you know, Helen,” said her husband, fondly drawing her toward him, “that I foresaw all this, and used every honorable effort to open Desmond’s eyes to Charlotte’s true character? I told him that she was selfish, vain, but above all high tempered. He could not see her character in the same light in which I saw it: we came near having high words; but wisely concluded to avoid a subject on which we could not agree. His looks, when he visits us, convince me that he remembers our conversation.”

“And yet,” said the young wife, after a pause, “he might be happy if it was not for Charlotte’s temper, for her vanity and selfishness, and indeed all her other errors might, by the aid of love, be corrected. But oh! the scenes I have witnessed there. It would break my heart, dear Fletcher, to have you look at me as she sometimes looks at her husband! And she is daily becoming worse. Her husband’s visible unhappiness stings her heart, and awakes all her evil passions. A single spark blows all into a flame. Alas! for the life they must mutually lead.”

“It is indeed dreadful to contemplate,” said the husband, “I always feared a high temper, and believe half of the unhappy marriages, of which we hear so many complain, can be traced to it. But let us, dear Helen, change this gloomy

conversation. You shall sew and I will read to you.”

A year from that time, Desmond, who, meantime had become thoroughly dissipated, was found drowned. The coroner’s jury brought in a verdict of accidental death. Let us hope it was so, and not attribute it to despair, brought on by his wife’s temper.

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